WEBSITE HEALTH CHECK

A SELF-ASSESSMENT GUIDE FOR LAWYERS

Could your website work harder for you? Gerald Newman, of LawComms.com explains how to score your website's marketing effectiveness.

How does your website score?

Is your website robust enough to support e-marketing activity? Are you keeping up with the rapid changes in the online world? Are you missing opportunities for cost-effective on-line marketing?

E-marketing offers increasingly attractive value for money, as 2009's economic circumstances and tougher competition place increasing pressure on fee-earning, while financial prudence constrains your marketing budget.

Our Guide to E-marketing for Lawyers (at www.lawcomms.com) explains your e-marketing options in detail. This guide focusses on your website.

Use this check-list to evaluate your own website and benchmark it against your competitors. Score each question and see how your total compares.

Two other companion LawComms publications provide in-depth guidance:
* *Guide to News Publishing and the Art of Writing*
* *E-marketing Made Easy –Strategies for Lawyers.*
Both are free to download at www.LawComms.com.

Does your Home Page make an impact?

An over-designed website is counterproductive, but your Home Page needs to create a positive and distinctive first impression.

If your visitors have to "Click to enter" or "Skip intro" before they reach the Home Page proper, this creates an unnecessary barrier: deduct *2 points*.

Some sets –Matrix, for example – stand out through use of images, headlines and text that give their Home Page the feel of a magazine cover.

Raymond Buildings' Home Page makes an impact with their tabloid-sized headlines about their latest cases.

But too many sets are content with a static brochure-style Home Page, uninspiring design and bland text. Generic practice descriptions such as "Our reputation is built on a strong tradition of legal expertise, and a dedication to outstanding client service" or similar fail to say anything about your own set's unique qualities.

Do you think your Home Page stands out from the competition and captures visitors' attention? Award yourself *2 points* if you feel your Home Page makes a strongly positive impression, *1 point* if it is only adequate, and *no points* if it fails to make any impact.

Examples of sites making an impact in different ways include:
www.crownofficechambers.com
www.hogarthchambers.com
www.tooks.co.uk
www.nipclaw.com
www.matrixlaw.co.uk/home.aspx
www.3raymondbuildings.com

Look and feel: What impression does your site convey?

Take a critical look at your website's colour palettes, fonts, images, use of space, and overall design. What adjectives come to mind?

> Cool/boring? Conservative/outdated? Leading edge/over-designed? Traditional/old-fashioned? Friendly/unbusinesslike? Corporate/characterless? Professional/impersonal? Information-packed/confusing? Fresh/stale? Different/unfamiliar? Client-focussed/inward-looking?

Now think about the adjectives that you would want people to use to describe your set. There are no definitive right or wrong answers: your choice of descriptors should reflect your set's unique qualities and values.

How do the your descriptions of the website and your set compare? Consider whether your website projects the impression that you want.

Many lawyers' websites are safe, bland and corporate in their look and feel. Cold blues and greys dominate the palettes used. Could yours stand out more?

Pictures of people will help your website convey personality. Law is a people business, dependant on relationships of trust. Websites lacking human pictures (other than in profiles) tend to have an impersonal feel.

Pictures of lawbooks, Chambers' premises, name boards etc are very widely used on Bar websites. Think whether there are other images which would better project your set's unique qualities.

Award yourself *2 points* if you feel the design of your website is attractive, and conveys the impression that you want, 1 point if it is adequate, but none if it is unsatisfactory.

Do you keep your Home Page looking fresh and different?

Your Home Page needs to offer visitors interesting, relevant information straightaway. Static brochure-style information lacks impact especially for regular clients making repeat visits to the site. Updates are the essence of the web.

However, before considering updates, you can *add a point* if the appearance of your Home Page is refreshed in some other way, for example by rotating pictures and captions which change every time the Home Page is opened. Examples include: www.oldsquare.co.uk, www.crownofficechambers.com.

Online news updates are the best way to keep your Home Page looking fresh, and they help to maintain prominence in search results.

Deduct *2 points* if your Home Page is essentially unchanging from month to month (posting updated references to the Legal 500 and Chambers Directory recommendations once a year is not enough).

Score *no points* if your Home Page carries only professional announcements about new members, QC or judicial appointments. These "Chambers congratulates…" items tend to focus on internal interests, rather than the interests of the website's visitors.

Some sets have opted to use a news feed from a third-party provider - presumably because there is no one in-house with the time to write material. This has a triple disadvantage:
* You tell visitors nothing about the work and qualities of the set itself
* The headlines will look irrelevant to professionals who already obtain their legal news from primary sources and instead interested in your services.
* It tempts visitors to go off to another website to follow up a story.

Deduct 1 point if you use a third party news feed instead of publishing your own news.

Your cases make the best material because they show off members' skills and achievements.

The senior clerk of a prominent set told LawComms: "The news section is an excellent window on my set's current work, reflecting our involvement in high profile cases. Our clients probably look at our web site before calling the clerks or a barrister."

These sites show some of the ways in which news can be presented to advantage:
www.doughtystreet.co.uk
www.littletonchambers.com
www.3raymondbuildings.com

Score *3 points* if you publish a news story about your cases more or less every week, *2 points* if you do so somewhat less often, and *1 point* if you do so less than once a month.

If you are sceptical about the feasibility or value of publishing a full range of your news online, read our Guide to Online News: www.lawcomms.com.

You can also benefit from our practical tips for writing online news and press releases: www.lawcomms.com.

LawComms supports chambers who find that time constraints prevent them from publishing as much material as they would like. If you are in this position, LawComms can write up your stories for publication, issue news releases, and help keep your news page up to date.

WEBSITE OR COBWEBSITE? IS EVERYTHING UP TO DATE?

As well as keeping your Home Page looking fresh, all your content needs to be kept up to date. *Deduct a point* for each of the following common problems if they apply to your website:
* Invitation to a seminar or other event which has already taken place
* Pupil, staff, or member recruitment notice with a closing date in the past
* More than a third of member profiles last updated a year or more ago.

Check other housekeeping details as well. Does your site have any broken links, for example?

IS YOUR SITE USER-FRIENDLY AND EASY TO NAVIGATE?

How easily can clients find counsel to match their needs? Useability is an essential. Your content, however good, is useless if visitors cannot navigate around your site, quickly and intuitively, to find it.

Barristers' profiles are at the heart of the purpose of the Chambers website. Listings and profiles of barristers ought therefore to be as accessible and easy-to-use as possible.

Surprisingly, many sets do not cater effectively for this need. Most Bar websites simply feature "Members" as a tab on the Home Page menu bar. Since this is likely to be the information that most visitors want, it should be available immediately without having to click to reach another page. Deduct a point if your list of counsel is more than one click away from the Home Page.

Score 2 points if, like sets including Cloisters, you provide a user-friendly search facility on the Home Page itself: www.cloisters.com.

Too many sets still list their members only in order of seniority. *Score 1* point if you also offer an alphabetical listing. Lists by specialism also make it easier for clients to find counsel to match their needs: score 1 point for this. Pages for each of your main specialisms help professional visitors go direct to the information they need. *Score 2 points* if, like Doughty Street, you have a page bringing together background information, articles, publications, and membership lists for each area of work: www.doughtystreet.co.uk.

Some sets – 39 Essex Street, Took's Court, or Matrix, for example – have adopted the format of a magazine cover for their Home Page. Headlines, picture stories, and quick summaries offer a user-friendly way to help visitors find their way around than the static menus and lists that most sites rely on: www.matrixlaw.co.uk/home.aspx, www.39essex.co.uk, www.tooks.co.uk. *Deduct a point* if your site has multiple pages each with just a paragraph or two of text. *Deduct another point* if News or Seminar information is more than one click away from the Home Page.

DO YOU HAVE USEFUL RELEVANT CONTENT? IS IT INTERACTIVE?

Articles, seminar or conference papers and case reports demonstrate the set's expertise. This material is already produced by members and can provide valuable content for online visitors. For best results, a page dedicated to each specialist area of law should include links to all the relevant materials.
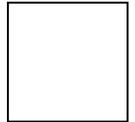
Many sets include a summary of their quality standards (Matrix), Equal Opportunities policy (2 Hare Court), or even their fees (Doughty Street). This can help underpin client relationships.

The Bar emphasises its commitment to pro bono, but it is surprisingly unusual to find information about activities on Chambers websites. Very few Bar websites try to engage interactively with online visitors. Are there creative ideas about how your site could achieve this?

Legal resources are featured by some Bar websites but require resource and commitment if they are to be of value to visitors, and there is little point in duplicating resources that are already available elsewhere online. Compare the legal resources offered by other Bar websites:

- One sole practitioner solicitor, Tessa Shepperson at www.landlordlaw.co.uk, shows how a strongly client-focussed interactive legal resource can be developed successfully.
- Chambers websites with legal resources are listed at www.venables.co.uk/bary.htm
- Individual barristers' sites with legal resources are listed at www.venables.co.uk/barx.htm.

Try to be objective in evaluating your site's content and interactivity on a *scale from 0 up to a maximum of 3 points.*

DOES YOUR SITE CATER FOR IMPAIRED USERS?

Any website re-design or up-grade should address the need to meet accessibility standards for users with impaired vision or other disabilities. While not necessarily a requirement of the Disability Discrimination Act, accessibility for this client group is strongly urged by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, and is good business practice.

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) are produced by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C, the web's governing body). They provide checkpoints designed to ensure that web sites are designed and written with accessibility in mind: www.w3.org/WAI.

The main points in the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines are summarised by the Employers Forum on Disability www.efd.org.uk:
- Images have alternative text (so if you are unable to see the image you can still read the text).
- Colour contrast between foreground and background is sufficiently strong.
- Text can be resized according to the user's preference.

- Headings are correctly used (and are not just ordinary text made to look big and bold).
- Text for links make sense by themselves (and do not just say "Click here" or "More information...").
- Tables are used for laying out tabular information and have proper headings and summaries.
- Visual presentation is defined in 'stylesheets' and is not embedded in the pages.

The RNIB publishes a Good Design section online, which includes a Web Access Centre: www.rnib.org.uk.

Cloisters is an example of a site offering accessibility options: www.cloisters.com/accessibility.php.

Score 2 points if you have done your best to make your web site as accessible as possible, adhering sensibly and practically to the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.

HOW MUCH DO YOU CARE WHAT YOUR WEBSITE VISITORS THINK?

Your website should be focused on its users. Statistics will tell you much about how people are using the site. Occasionally comments are provided spontaneously by visitors. And if you take your website seriously, you may have obtained visitors' opinions informally or through a survey.

Score 1 point if you review website statistics at least a couple of times annually, and a further *1 point* if you have sought feedback from clients, however informally, and another *1 point* if you have made changes as result of statistics or feedback. *Lose a point* if you don't know where to find the statistics, if you can't remember when you last looked at them, or if you haven't reviewed them for a year.

HOW DID YOU SCORE?

Total the points you have scored:

- *A minus score:* Your website needs serious attention. Hit the help button now.
- *0 to 10 point:* Satisfactory. Your website does a reasonable job, and you can easily make improvements so that it promotes your set and your members even more effectively. Contact LawComms if you would like to discuss your options.
- *More than 10 point:* Excellent. Move on to the E-marketing Guide to see whether there are ways you can build further on this important asset.

DO YOU HAVE AN E-MARKETING STRATEGY MAPPED OUT?

Does your website form part of an overall e-marketing strategy? Is the website integrated with all your other marketing activity?

A website, however good, has to wait for users to visit. Pro-active e-marketing can enhance the value of a website still further, and help attract increasing numbers of users.

For example, circulating emails or letters, with links to a relevant material, to key professional clients or prospects, media contacts, and opinion-formers will help keep the set's name in peoples' minds, generate positive publicity, and bring visitors to the website.

E-marketing can also include search engine optimisation, obtaining listings on related third-party sites and online directories, submission of editorial material to other sites, paid-for online advertising, even use of text-messaging and social networking websites.

To develop your strategy, use our comprehensive guide to E-marketing strategy: www.lawcomms.com.

Gerald Newman runs LawComms, www.LawComms.com, which specialises in marketing communications for lawyers. Gerald formerly practised as a solicitor, launched major communications and online projects for the Law Society, and was Practice Director with Cloisters Chambers in the Temple.

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